

### 3 Reasons You Should Avoid Competency Based Degree Programs

You may have read the story of Zach Sherman, a 21-year-old janitor in Ohio who earned his competency-based [online associate degree](#) in 100 days. Sherman speed-studied his way through two years of college to earn his degree online in about three months as opposed to the traditional two years.

Sounds great, eh?

Competency based degree programs promise students faster, cheaper college credentials. But that promise is not always met.

Buyers beware: choosing a competency based degree can represent a costly step toward college failure.



## What is Competency-Based Learning?

Competency programs expect students to enter armed with skills learned on the job, through [life experience](#) or via career certifications.

Competency-based learning helps online students fill in knowledge gaps through self-study around specific areas. Often there are no formal courses, only materials to be studied. Mentors may be available to help.

**In competency programs, students pay for the time it takes them to document their skills rather than paying for new learning or direct course instruction.** Students are given a set time period—often six months—to self-study toward a set of exams.

Mentors may guide students, but do not directly “teach” course material. At the end of a paid learning term, students take exams. These exams help prove that discrete skills have been mastered, such as Java programming (for IT pros) or critical wound care (for nurses).

Each specific competency is noted on a transcript. Once the student passes all competency knowledge areas—up to 100 documentable skills may be required to earn an [online bachelor's degree](#)—s/he is awarded a degree.

## Which Students Benefit from Competency Based Degree Programs?

### 1. Adult Learners with Solid College Skills

Most competency-based degree programs are bachelor completion programs. To gain admission, you'll need to already have earned an associate's degree or an equivalent. Students who have not yet mastered college-level writing, reasoning or math may struggle to pass written competency tests. All competency degree programs require incoming students to take and pass basic skills tests prior to admission.

### 2. Certified Professionals in IT, Nursing, Teaching or Healthcare

If you already possess career experience or certification in areas like [nursing](#) or [IT](#), where private vendor certification is often more critical than a degree, you may have already acquired the skills necessary to pass degree-related competency tests by studying for your licensing exams. Most competency-based online degree programs, such as those offered by Western Governors University, are geared toward majors in IT, nursing, business or healthcare. Professionals who hold private career certifications or licensing in these areas are the best candidates for competency-based learning.

### 3. Highly Motivated Students

Studying when you want and how you want sounds great. But in reality, the majority of online students fail at self-study. They lack either the self-discipline or [time management skills](#) (or both) required to motivate themselves through knowledge acquisition. Most competency programs provide mentors or guides, but be forewarned that mentors are not the same as instructors. If you find yourself struggling with learning materials, a mentor may not be enough to help you prepare for final exams.

## 3 Reasons to Avoid Competency Based Degrees

### 1. Cost is Not Fixed – Procrastination is Common and Costly

When you buy education by the traditional time method (one course or one semester), you pay one fixed price. You pay per credit or per course. You get an instructor-led course from beginning to end. Most students are familiar with this traditional, highly-structured approach.

Competency programs don't charge by the course or by the credit. They charge for blocks of time. If you suffer from procrastination, you may pay for a full six months of learning, often billed as "subscription fees" that give you access to learning materials and mentors, yet fail to ready yourself to take the exams required at the end of the term to demonstrate competency.

For example, Northern Arizona University's competency-based personalized learning online bachelor's program charges a set cost of \$2,500 per term. That fee entitles students to receive open access to online lessons and learning materials for a period of six months.

[NAU tells](#) online students: "Instead of tuition, think of it as an unlimited subscription. There are no semesters. Start your studies any time and complete as much work as you are able. Simply renew your subscription every six months until you finish your degree."

This type of open approach sounds great—until you realize there are no refunds once the fee is paid AND it's up to you to self-study, gain the competencies AND take the exams to prove competency, all WITHIN those six months.

If you don't pass the exams within six months, you're out the \$2,500 "subscription fee" with no college credits banked toward a degree. You must pay a new subscription fee and begin self-study again.

### 2. Transfer Credits May Not Be Accepted

Some competency degree programs do not accept transfer credits for courses completed elsewhere. Instead, they require students to take and pass equivalency exams that are tied to their competency sets. Check before you enroll to assess for this feature. If you succeed at completing a set of competencies at the end of a subscription-learning period, be aware that most traditional colleges will not accept competency-based transcripts toward their own degrees.

Once you start a competency-based learning program online, be prepared to complete an entire degree using this method. Failure to do so can leave you with a transcript of skills that may be worthless for transfer out later to another college.

### 3. Subscription Fees More Expensive Than Course Tuition

Remember, you pay a flat fee to access to learning materials and mentors for a set time. It's up to you to self-study and pass exams during your subscription period. If you don't pass exams in the time allotted, you'll have to pay another term fee and try again. And perhaps again.

Under the subscription method, it is possible to pay thousands in fees without earning a single college credit. Ask the program to give you student success rates prior to enrolling. Find out up front how many of their online students actually complete skill exams on time.

## What are the Best Competency-Based Colleges?

Despite all the press buzz, [life experience degrees](#) are not new. In fact, some of the best online programs for adult students have been around since the 1970s. Most of these early programs are offered by low-cost state colleges and universities and have solid reps for helping older nontraditional students succeed online.

**About the Author:** [Vicky Phillips](#) was cited in 2009 by US News & World Report as "for 20 years the leading consumer advocate for online college students." In 1989 she designed America's first online counseling center for distance learners on AOL. In 1998 she authored the first print guide to online graduate degrees – Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools put out by the Princeton Review. In 2001 she authored Never Too Late to Learn the Adult Student's Guide to College.



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